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Articles in Today's Clips

Tuesday, July 1, 2008

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Judge considering request for psych exam in child torture case

Posted by [alpayne](#) July 01, 2008 10:13AM



Cassandra Pasquale

Cassandra Pasquale, charged with torturing a seven-year-old boy in Bay City, "may not have been criminally responsible for her alleged offenses," her attorney says.

Jeffrey M. Day has asked Circuit Judge William J. Caprathe to order Pasquale, 31, of Bay City, to the Center for Forensic Psychiatry in Ypsilanti for a psychiatric examination.

Pasquale, along with her husband, Michael, 33, and Michael Harsha, the alleged victim's father, have been charged with first- and second-degree child abuse for allegedly starving, burning, beating and choking a seven-year-old boy in Bay City.

The Pasquales also have been charged with torture, which carries a maximum sentence of life in prison. Prosecutors had offered the pair a plea bargain to dismiss the torture charge in exchange for guilty pleas to the abuse counts; they would serve less than eight years in prison in exchange for their pleas. The plea deal has been put on hold while Caprathe hears the motion for Cassandra Pasquale's evaluation.

Caprathe will hear the motion at 8:30 a.m. July 9.

Day has indicated that his client plans to enter a plea of not guilty by reason of insanity.

"Due to the nature of her problems, she may not have been criminally responsible for the alleged offense," Day wrote.

He also indicated she may be "unable to rationally assist in her defense and may be unable to handle the pressure of being present in an open court room."

The plea bargain offered by prosecutors would have had the Pasquales giving up the rights to their other children; each has a child with another partner. There has been no indication that those children were abused.

Michael Harsha, the father of the alleged victim, had signed parental rights of the child over to the Pasquales because, he told investigators, he feared that the state would try to take custody of the child from him. He has agreed to testify against the Pasquales and is expected to go to trial on the child abuse charges sometime in July.

Harsha's custody rights have been terminated, and the boy is in custody of a maternal relative. His mother died when he was a preschooler.

The boy weighed just 31 pounds when brought to the hospital last year with a severe burn. Although he initially made excuses for his bruises and burns, he later said he had been locked in the basement or in a closet and was regularly beaten by all three of the adults in his household.

He said he would sometimes go without food for three days or more while others in the house, including the visiting children, were allowed to eat.

Categories: [Breaking News](#), [Courts and cops](#)

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July 1, 2008

Internet crime case adjourned

*Trace Christenson
The Enquirer*

A hearing for a Farwell man, charged with Internet crimes, was adjourned Tuesday.

James Young, III, 34, is charged with enticing a child for immoral purposes and using a computer to commit a crime. He faces up to 20 years in prison if convicted.

Calhoun County Sheriff Department detectives alleged that Young was conducting chats over the Internet with a person he thought was a 13- year-old girl who was willing to meet him for sex. He actually was talking with an adult from the online Web site, Perverted Justice.

When Young arrived at a McDonald's in Marshall, he was arrested.

Young was scheduled to appear for a preliminary examination, but when his attorney didn't appear, District Judge Marvin Ratner adjourned the case. It was not immediately rescheduled.



Livingston County father gets 15 to 75 years in prison for sexually abusing 12-year-old son

Posted by The Associated Press June 30, 2008 13:35PM

LIVINGSTON COUNTY, Michigan -- A Livingston County man has been sentenced to at least 15 years in prison for sexually abusing his then-12-year-old son.

The Tyrone Township father pleaded guilty last month to 14 counts of first-degree criminal sexual conduct. He was sentenced Thursday to a minimum of 15 years and maximum of 75 years in prison.

He also was sentenced on two counts of distributing obscene material to children and one count each of third-degree child abuse and failing to send a child to school.

The man was arrested after his son passed a note during dinner to a neighbor saying he was being abused.

A message seeking comment was left for the man's attorney.

The father's name is not being published to protect the identity of his son.

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Mesick man charged with trying to burn home

By Matt Whetstone



CADILLAC - A Mesick man is being held on \$50,000 bond after police say he attempted to torch his home with his wife and children inside.

Troopers from the Michigan State Police Post in Cadillac went to the home of Raymond Henry Johnson, 47, after Wexford County Central Dispatch " received a 911 call Sunday.

The caller reported that Johnson was attempting to burn his house down with his wife and children inside. The home is located on 10 1/2 Road in Wexford Township.

Upon arriving, state troopers found a strong odor of diesel fuel while also noticing splash marks from the fuel on the porch and siding of the residence.

After searching the home, troopers surmised that the occupants had escaped the home into the woods adjacent to the backyard before Johnson was able to ignite the fuel.

However, Johnson also had fled the scene, police said.

Sgt. Mike Salasky with the MSP said there were multiple children involved but their ages are not being released at this time. Once police began searching for Johnson, they were able to take him into custody without incident.

No one was injured, Salasky said.

Johnson was arraigned Monday in 84th District Court on a charge of arson preparing to burn a property with a value greater than \$20,000. He faces a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison and \$15,000 in fines if he is convicted.

Bond is set at \$50,000 cash or 10 percent surety. A pretrial is scheduled for 1 p.m. on July 8.



Saginaw shooting leaves 17-year-old in critical condition

Posted by The Saginaw News July 01, 2008 08:55AM

Saginaw police were investigating a shooting that left a 17-year-old in critical condition this morning.

Samuel J. Lawrence of Saginaw was standing in front of his home along Lapeer near South 14th at 10:45 p.m. Monday when three black males, all between 18 to 25, pulled out at least one handgun and began firing, witnesses told police.

Lawrence suffered a wound to his abdomen and the trio fled south on foot on South 14th, said Detective Sgt. Mark Lively. Police did not find any shell casings at the scene

In early June, Saginaw County Circuit Judge William A. Crane sentenced Lawrence -- who listed his address as 4116 Atwood in Bridgeport Township -- to three years probation for carrying a concealed weapon Dec. 10 on North River near Gratiot, Thomas Township. The judge ordered Lawrence to pay \$480 in fees and fines. Lawrence pleaded guilty.

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July 1, 2008

Ingham buys land for youth academy

\$1.9M purchase of church site will let school grow

Kevin Grasha
kgrasha@lsj.com

A program that helps youths in the juvenile court system earn high school diplomas has a new home, allowing it to double in size this fall.

The Ingham Academy - which this past school year was housed in a downtown Lansing office building attached to Veterans Memorial Courthouse - will open in September at the location of Our Savior Lutheran Church and School on West Holmes Road. The church is moving to Delta Township.

Ingham County has bought the 46,000-square-foot building and its 22-acre Lansing site.

When the academy opens in September, 40 students are expected to fill four classrooms, up from the approximately 20 students who attended this school year.

The program helps youths in grades 9 through 12 who find it difficult to succeed in a traditional school. Some have behavioral problems or have been expelled from school or have multiple suspensions, said Ingham County Circuit Judge Janelle Lawless, who helped develop the academy with the court's juvenile division.

"The goal is to help some of these kids who would not be able to get their diploma through any other educational means," said Lawless, the presiding judge of the court's family division.

The new Ingham County Family Center will house the academy, which will run from morning until evening.

Each classroom will have a certified teacher, a behavioral specialist and a juvenile court officer, Lawless said.

The county paid \$1.975 million for the church and school building, 22 acres of property and some other buildings, said Controller Matthew Myers. Funding came from a juvenile justice millage, which was renewed in 2006.

Debra Matthews, 48, has lived across the street from Our Savior Lutheran for four years.

Although she is concerned about safety issues stemming from having the youths nearby, Matthews said: "I think that it can be good for the community and can bring in jobs. Kids need a safe place to go."

Staff writer David Harris contributed to this story.



July 1, 2008

Detroit officer kills teen trying to rob him

Morning update

Associated Press

DETROIT -- Authorities say an off-duty Detroit police officer fatally shot a teenager who was attempting to steal the officer's car at a gas station.

WXYZ-TV and WDIV-TV report the officer was in his car at a west side Detroit station early Tuesday morning when he was approached by the teen. Police say the officer shot the teen several times during the carjacking attempt.

The teen died at the scene. The officer was not hurt.

WXYZ says investigators are reviewing the gas station's surveillance video.

Experts discuss drug abuse in Kalamazoo area after teen's death from heroin overdose

Posted by [aholcomb](#) July 01, 2008 11:15AM



Courtesy of the Bousfield familyPortage Central graduate and actor Amy Bousfield died Saturday morning after suffering a heroin overdose on Thursday, June 26. [Her mother, Kelly, urged her castmates in the Whole Art Theatre's production of "Hair" to finish the run of the show.](#) Discussion at a public hearing last night dealt with the teen's death and more general issues of drug use in and around Kalamazoo.

KALAMAZOO -- An overdose of heroin killed recent Portage Central High School graduate Amy Bousfield, her mother said after a public hearing Monday on substance abuse and mental health that included discussion of the girl's death on Saturday.

"We're not proud that she died from a heroin overdose, but we're not embarrassed, either," said Kelly Bousfield from her Portage home. "Amy was not a drug addict, but she suffered highly from depression and she recently stopped taking her medication to see if she could do without it.

"Depression is nothing to be ashamed of, and more people need to know what it can lead to. Amy was self-medicating."

The public hearing was a routine step in the budgeting process for [Kalamazoo Community Mental Health Services](#), but the discussion was anything but routine such a short time after Amy Bousfield's death.

Dr. Michael Leipman, psychiatrist and addictionologist at Michigan State University's [Kalamazoo Center for Medical Studies](#), spoke specifically about the teen's overdose and also in general terms about drug use in and around Kalamazoo.

"It's tragic what happened to her," Leipman told the Kalamazoo Community Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services board members and about 100 audience members. "We need to change our direction, as demonstrated by the death of Amy Bousfield."

Leipman urged the board to increase funding for programs to battle what he calls "a horrible problem in our community."

"It has gotten significantly worse over the last few years," Leipman said after the hearing. "And Portage has a huge drug problem."

Related stories

[Which drug do you think is the biggest](#)

"Ten or 15 years ago, there were a few drug dealers and a lot of customers. Now, all the customers become dealers."

Leipman spoke of dealers pushing drugs in schools, of hiding heroin in the ceiling to avoid drug-sniffing dogs. The problem, he said, is spreading to areas that formerly seemed insulated from hard drug use.

Kelly Bousfield discovered, tragically, just how close to home hard drugs have come. "As for heroin, I am finding that there's an awful lot of it in this town," she said. "It's not that hard to get."

Leipman called on parents to be aware of the possibility of their children's drug use. He also pointed to an antiquated system that he said doesn't properly serve Michigan's children.

"There's no detox facility in this state for anyone under the age of 17 because this system was developed before people knew that kids might need detox," Leipman said.

Many members of the audience were mental-health professionals who told the board about the programs in which they were involved and to plead for continued funding. Others were current and former participants in programs they say have turned their lives around.

Lisa Stitt, 26, of Dowagiac, said she surrendered her parental rights after legal trouble stemming from using and dealing marijuana. As a result, she turned to cocaine to ease the pain of losing her three children younger than age 3. That was four years ago. As of Monday evening, Stitt has been clean for "one year, two months and two days."

"I live at [Hope House](#) in Sturgis, and it's wonderful there," Stitt said. "I get the support I need in my recovery."

Stitt hopes eventually to find work as a women's advocate working with domestic-abuse victims, and she holds out hope to be a mom again.

"I expect that two of my three children will be returned to me," she said. "And it's because of Hope House."

Clinical Director James Brundirks, of [Community Healing Centers](#) in Kalamazoo, came to voice support of services in place.

"There has been a movement toward the integration of addiction services and mental-health services," he said. "I had some fears about this, but am happy to give it a positive report card."

Lauren Longwell, also of Community Healing Centers, said that addiction's claws reach far beyond the addict.

"Addiction is not a spectator sport," she said. "Eventually the whole family gets to play. We must have community backup to fight it because if we don't, we're a sinking ship."

Categories: [Top Stories](#)

Comments

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problem among Southwest Michigan teens and young adults?

- ☐ I don't think there's a major drug problem in our area.
- ☐ Crack Cocaine
- ☐ Marijuana
- ☐ Methamphetamine
- ☐ Heroin
- ☐ Powder Cocaine

Vote

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More Resources

-
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: [Trends in Unintentional Drug Overdose Deaths report](#)
- [Kalamazoo Community Mental Health & Substance Abuse Services](#)
- [Michigan Department of Community Health](#)



Housing slump, economy keeps shelter busy

BY BILL O'BRIEN

bobrien@record-eagle.com

July 01, 2008 10:02 am

Special Report: Living on the Edge

This story is one in a three-day series that examines the lives of those caught in the grip of the failing state and national economies, and offers snapshot examples of how your friends, family, neighbors, and communities cope during bad times.

To read the full series, including Monday & Tuesday's stories, see record-eagle.com/economy.

TRAVERSE CITY -- Ken Homa can see the region's tattered economy wearing on the people his agency tries to assist during tough times.

Almost three of every four people who stay at Goodwill Inn homeless shelter in Traverse City are without jobs, about 20 percent more than last year, said Homa, director of housing services for Goodwill Industries.

Last year, 25 percent of the shelter's residents worked at full-time jobs, compared to just 11 percent now.

"They're having a tough time," Homa said. "Even if they are working, they're not working full-time jobs so they can do what they need to move on."

The poor economy in northern Michigan, combined with the region's continuing housing slump, is making for a busy summer at the regional homeless shelter.

The shelter almost doubled in size in late 2006. It houses around 80 persons a night and sometimes up to 90 or more, Goodwill spokeswoman Ruth Blick said. It provided a roof for more than 800 people in its first year, double the amount served by the old shelter on the west side of Traverse City.

It's difficult to track the number of homeless in northern Michigan, but communities are studying that population more closely as part of a two-year-old statewide initiative to develop long-range homeless reduction plans.

The Michigan Coalition Against Homelessness estimates there are 2,774 homeless people in a 21-county region in northern Lower Michigan, representing almost 5 percent of the state's total. Close to one-third are children who are part of homeless families.

Local homeless populations range from more than 600 in the five-county Grand Traverse area, to 300-plus in Charlevoix and Emmet counties, according to estimates from local agencies.

Unemployment and a lack of affordable housing were cited as reasons for homelessness in the Traverse City area. Alcohol and drug abuse, and physical and mental disabilities were other factors.

Another local five-county survey done in early 2007 as part of a regional Poverty Reduction Initiative showed 18 percent of respondents needed more help to find adequate housing and 11 percent were living with family and friends without a place of their own.

But homeless numbers could be considerably higher because it's a difficult segment to quantify by traditional data collection methods, said Matt McCauley, a regional planner for the Northwest Michigan Council of Governments.

"It's a moving target ... if you're homeless, it's very difficult to count you," McCauley said.

Much of the homeless information is put together by social service agencies that typically don't glean much information from clients. Plus, those figures often don't count people living in their cars, camping out or staying with friends and family to avoid life on the street, he said.

Goodwill officials said the shelter also is seeing more people affected by the housing downturn, losing their own homes to foreclosure, or in some cases forced out of rental homes with financing problems.

Homa said it's led to a handful of families on a waiting list for rooms at the shelter.

"We've seen more people with foreclosure situations, definitely," Blick said.

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Homeless dream of better lives

BY SHERI McWHIRTER

smcwhirter@record-eagle.com

July 01, 2008 09:53 am

Special Report: Living on the Edge

This story is one in a three-day series that examines the lives of those caught in the grip of the failing state and national economies, and offers snapshot examples of how your friends, family, neighbors, and communities cope during bad times.

To read the full series, including Monday & Tuesday's stories, see record-eagle.com/economy.

RAPID CITY -- Sometimes she wakes in the middle of the night and worries she's not a good mother.

She listens as her children sleep nearby, their rhythmic breathing a small comfort, a hedge against anxiety and fear that threaten to overwhelm her.

She listens to the night sounds so close, just outside the thin walls of a tent she and her children -- Mary, 17, Edward, 12, and Aimee, 4 -- call home.

This is Marsha Fillion Reznick's life. A single woman, 43, huddled against the night in a tent with three of her four kids. It's the only home she can afford to provide them.

"Basically, I've been moving for the last three months," Reznick said. "I can't afford a campground. Campgrounds are expensive."

She works as a part-time cashier in Acme, a minimum wage job.

A recent divorce, a bad car accident and crushing living and transportation costs left Reznick homeless and locked in financial shambles. Hers is a constant struggle to find a new place to live and to take care of her children.

On Monday, she was on the move again, lugging her tent and belongings to the lawn of a friend's home in Alden. Left behind was the property adjacent to her longtime Rapid City house, the home she once shared with her ex-husband and children.

Reznick was forced to give up the house after her divorce because she couldn't afford the \$358 monthly land contract payments.

Lingering injuries from a January car accident left her unable to work long hours, and make it difficult to find a good full-time job.

A lack of money means less security and greater challenges in caring for her children.

Homeless dream of better lives

Reznick has half-time custody of three of her four children. When she has them, they stay with her in the tent.

"My son hates it. If the weather is really bad, I don't have them stay," she said. "It's not easy. It's very difficult to keep everything clean."

Reznick and her children shower at friends' homes and must travel each day to the store for groceries.

"I can't really cook for them and food stamps don't allow you to buy premade food. I can't keep leftovers. I can't keep things cold," Reznick said.

Her ex-husband lives with his mother and the children stay there during his periods of custody.

Reznick had an offer for shelter space in Traverse City, but it didn't come with guaranteed beds for her three children. She wouldn't go without them, she said.

She applied for state and federal housing assistance and is listed 212th on a waiting list for Section 8 housing. Reznick also waits to hear about other assistance programs.

"I can scratch enough together to get a place, but can't afford to keep it going," she said.

Reznick's woes are compounded by mental health problems. She is bipolar and while her doctor gives her free samples of medication, she sometimes borrows money to help pay for medicine.

That's another concern for Reznick: How will she afford her prescribed medication once she does find another home?

"Rent will take away from that," she said.

In the meantime, Reznick wants to find affordable housing in Bellaire, where her children attend school. However, she doesn't yet know where she stands until she learns what public assistance she qualifies for and how long the help will last, she said.

Her plight is not unique, said Kathleen Arndt, executive director of the Friendship Shelter in Gaylord, which is seeing more and more homeless clients on their doorstep.

The homeless shelter averages between 33 and 35 clients from Otsego County, up from an average 10 to 12 just a few years ago, Arndt said.

"Many times it involves substance abuse problems and many have additional health problems and can slip through the cracks," she said.

Often they have trouble keeping solid employment and simply cannot come up with monthly rent money, Arndt said.

"We're not seeing it from a lot of foreclosures. More often it's because they can't afford the rent," she said.

A homeless survey will be done in August in Otsego County, when officials will hit the streets and check area motels and campgrounds for those without a place to live, Arndt said.

The struggle to carry on and maintain a semblance of family life isn't easy, Reznick said.

"Finding a home is the first thing on my mind in the morning and the last thing on my mind at night," she said. "This is not the way I wanted my children to live. It's difficult and I just try to keep a happy face on."

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Photos



Marsha Fillion Reznick packs up a trophy along with papers as she and her three children move out of their mobile home. Record-Eagle



Edward Fillion, 12, throws old papers into a fire while helping his parents move from their mobile home following their divorce. Record-Eagle



Ed Fillion, center, brushes his hair back while helping his ex-wife, Marsha Fillion Reznick, and their three children move out of the mobile home they shared for nine years. Daughter Mary, 17, son Edward, 12, and daughter Aimee, 4, are living with Marsha in a tent on the property while Ed is living with his mother. Record-Eagle



'I can't handle this, this is not good for my children,' said Marsha Fillion Reznick, who's living with three of her children in a tent near the mobile home they're vacating. Record-Eagle



Ed Fillion and his son Edward, 12, move a table from a garage at the home they used to live in. Record-Eagle



Mary Reznick, 17, zips up the tent she's sharing with her mother, Marsha, and her brother Edward, 12. Record-Eagle



Marsha Fillion Reznick sweeps out the garage as she and her family pack to move. Record-Eagle



July 1, 2008

Local charities find it's tough to feed the hungry as cost of fuel, food rise

Ryan Loew
rloew@lsj.com

Rumbling through East Lansing in a 1998 Chevy truck, Jamesina Perez got a phone call from her boss, Phyllis Handley.

The message, as usual, was urgent.

Get to the Okemos Cracker Barrel, and rescue their pie crusts.

Perez and Handley are on staff at Lansing's Food Movers, a program of the Greater Lansing Food Bank which bills itself as a service that "rescues" prepared and perishable food from grocers, restaurants and other businesses, and delivers it to the needy.

But like those they serve, programs feeding the hungry in mid-Michigan are enduring hardships, too: rising fuel and food prices, declining donations and the need for more volunteers.

And on top of all that, they're being asked to meet an increased demand from the hungry.

"The system itself is going to have to re-evaluate how it does business," said Bill Long, interim director of the Food Bank Council of Michigan, an association of major food bank systems in the state. "And by that, I mean mainly: How are we accepting food? How can we be more efficient when it relates to transportation costs? And how can we, in fact, access more reclaimable food?"

The Cracker Barrel call came just moments after Perez and volunteer Phil Wells had loaded about 170 pounds of breads and sweets - pumpernickel bagels, sub buns and mini-bow-tie Danish rolls - into the refrigerated box attached to their truck at the Lake Lansing Road Kroger store.

Huge fuel bills

On June 17, their morning run through East Lansing, Okemos and downtown Lansing covered more than 25 miles.

And with rising fuel costs, filling up the tanks of Food Movers' three vehicles has become expensive.

At \$4.10 a gallon, filling up the truck cost about \$120.

Food Movers' \$15,000 gas and vehicle expenses budget for the 2007-08 fiscal year was "blown out of the water" by high fuel prices, Handley said.

So far this year, Food Movers has spent \$4,000 more on fuel and vehicle maintenance compared to this time last year, said Sharon Krinock, director of the Greater Lansing Food Bank.

The food bank is going to cover that cost through budget adjustments, Krinock said, and she expects fuel and vehicle expenses to be taken into greater consideration for the 2008-09 budget year.

When gas prices hit the \$3.50 mark, Food Movers was forced to adjust the way it does food runs, Handley said.

Typically, if a restaurant or grocer calls the program with available food, Food Movers volunteers make the drive to that location and pick it up.

Now, some of those individual "emergency" runs are getting postponed until volunteers can go out for their daily deliveries.

The program also is exploring new ways to approach routes, such as avoiding high traffic and construction areas, Krinock said.

At the Mid-Michigan Food Bank, "every stage of our operation has fuel built into it," said Dave Karr, director of the Lansing-based food bank. "So the more we have to pay for fuel, the less money we have for food."

The Mid-Michigan Food Bank distributes salvaged and donated food to 189 food pantries, shelters and soup kitchens in seven counties, including Ingham, Clinton and Eaton.

Fewer surpluses

As food prices rise, food itself becomes less available in stores, Karr said.

And since food banks operate on surpluses, that leaves less food to be donated to charities.

"Food banks, in short, are being hit just like the customer," Long said.

The price of food increased nearly 5 percent in 2007 - its largest increase in almost 20 years, according to the U.S. Department of Labor's Consumer Price Index.

Food donations to the Mid-Michigan Food Bank dropped by about 1 million pounds from 2006 to 2008, according to Kathe De-Mara Smith, operations supervisor for the food bank.

It's an issue with which food programs statewide are dealing, Long said, and in some cases, some smaller pantries may be forced to close their doors because of it.

Demand is up

While demand for food from the Salvation Army in Lansing has increased in recent years, the number of volunteers working has remained about the same, said Molly Chambers, director of Social Services for the charity.

The number of people receiving aid from the Salvation Army's food pantry jumped from 981 to 2,508 from 2006 to 2007, according to Chambers.

At the same time, however, the number of steady volunteers working the Salvation Army's food programs held to about 20, Chambers said.

"You do worry about that, but we always get it done," she said. "We find a way to get it done. We do what we have to do."

At Helping Hands food pantry in Charlotte, requests for food have grown as well. In 1995, Helping Hands saw 379 requests for food from people in the Charlotte area. Last year, it had 3,149.

The number of volunteers at the pantry has grown from about five in 1998 to about 12 today.

Program Director Pam Huffman expects the food requests to continue increasing, and she is concerned about the pantry's resources growing thin.

"Each day it becomes questionable as to whether we will have enough funding to purchase the food we need. We're always wondering if we're going to have enough money to make it through that

quarter," she said.



July 1, 2008

Free clinic offers dental services

The Enquirer

The Nursing Clinic of Battle Creek announced it has begun providing free dental cleanings and screenings to eligible clients. A hygienist will be on site two days a week during the summer months.

To find out eligibility or to set up an appointment, call 962-6565. Proof of income is required at the first visit.

The Nursing Clinic at 34 Green St. is a free medical clinic for the poor and uninsured.

Levin talks jobless benefits in Roseville

By DAN CORTEZ • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • July 1, 2008

A dozen unemployed residents from throughout southeast Michigan shared their stories of desperate job seeking and shrinking budgets with U.S. Rep. Sander Levin at a roundtable this morning in Roseville.

Levin, D-Royal Oak, was on hand to discuss the 13-week extension of unemployment benefits that President George W. Bush signed Monday. Meeting over coffee and doughnuts at the Roseville Parks and Recreation Department, Levin said he had wanted to get an additional 26 weeks, but that 13 was a compromise and that he would soon begin fighting for 13 more.

Residents talked about applying to as many as 400 jobs without any luck, draining their savings and falling into foreclosure.

“It affects your self-esteem,” said Elaine Stachowiak, 53, of Clinton Township, who is looking for an accounting job. “My full-time job right now is to look for a job.”

Levin credited those in attendance with putting a face on the issue by sharing their stories with his office.

“It was quite unusual, and we were struck by the number of letters,” he said. “They all had a central point: We believe in work and we need to work, but we need some help to tide us over.”

Levin asked each person to share his or her story and also asked for reaction to a pundit's comment that the extension will mean those receiving the benefits will have less incentive to look for work. A number of those in attendance bristled at the notion.

“That comment is obviously from someone who hasn't been in this position before,” said Jim Stoner, 57, of Mt. Clemens, who has been out of work since November. “That's ignorant.”

Find this article at:

<http://www.freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080701/NEWS04/80701037>



Tuesday, July 1, 2008

Base pay rate rises today to \$7.40

State hikes base hourly pay to \$7.40 as Bush OKs 13-week extension of jobless benefits.

Deb Price / The Detroit News

WASHINGTON -- Michigan's most struggling workers got two bits of good news Monday: longer unemployment benefits and a bump today in the minimum wage.

President Bush signed a 13-week extension in jobless benefits, which is expected to help about 200,000 unemployed workers in Michigan beginning this month. And starting today, the state minimum wage goes from \$7.15 to \$7.40 an hour. That will directly help about 267,000 Michigan workers.

Jennifer Wolschon, an unemployed loan processor in Taylor, said the extension will make "a humongous difference" as she continues looking for a job.

"It means I can pay the house payment for 13 more weeks," Wolschon said. "I also have to pay car insurance and credit cards. I've been having panic attacks. There are just no jobs out there."

Michigan has the nation's highest jobless rate, at 8.5 percent. The national average is 5.5 percent.

The first checks based on the extension will be mailed out on July 22, said Chris Peretto, the acting director of the Unemployment Insurance Agency of Michigan.

Workers who have, or will have received benefits from Nov. 1, 2006, and March 2009 get a standard 26 weeks of unemployment compensation; the legislation extends that to 39 weeks.

"A benefit extension will help these individuals afford rising food, gas and health care costs and make mortgage payments while they continue to search for work," said U.S. Rep. Sander Levin, D-Royal Oak.

Levin and Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Lansing, say they will continue pushing for a bonus 13 weeks of unemployment benefits for states with unemployment rates of 6 percent or higher.

That proposal, which would have entitled Michigan workers to checks for a full 52 weeks, was dropped in order to get the president's support for 13 weeks of benefits for all states.

But James Sherk, a labor expert at the Heritage Foundation, said studies show that extensions discourage job searching.

"When the jobless benefits are extended, workers take longer to get back to work," Sherk said. "Studies show there is a huge spike in the number of workers returning to work whatever week it is that the jobless benefits expire."

Meanwhile, workers like Adam Richard, a cashier at Ned's Bookstore in East Lansing, say they are looking forward to the boost in the minimum wage.

"It means a little bit more money, but it means everything will cost more, too," said Richard, 23, who recently graduated from Michigan State University.

In addition to the 267,000 Michigan workers directly benefiting from the boost in the minimum wage, an additional 482,000 workers will indirectly benefit, as wages tend to have a domino effect.

But while workers are getting more money in their pockets, businesses warn the higher wages mean they'll have to lay people off, cut back employees' hours, raise prices and put off planned renovations.

"Restaurants are doing everything they can now to survive," said Andy Deloney, spokesman for the Michigan Restaurant Association. "It's a mandatory increase in their labor costs at a time they don't have the money."

Michael LaFaive, director of fiscal policy at the Mackinac Center, a Midland-based conservative think-tank, said studies tie increases in the minimum wage to lost jobs.

"It reduces employment, particularly among the low skilled," said LaFaive.

Michigan's new wage ties Rhode Island for eighth-highest in the United States.

The \$5.85 federal minimum wage climbs to \$6.55 this month and to \$7.25 in July of next year.

Also rising Tuesday is the minimum wage for workers under 18, which pays less than the adult minimum wage. It goes from \$6.08 to \$6.29 an hour, then jumps to \$6.55 on July 24 when the federal minimum wage increases, superseding the state youth wage.

. In cases where an employee is subject to both the state and federal minimum wage laws, the employee is entitled to the higher of the two minimum wages.

The lower wage was created in 2006 to help small employers that couldn't afford to hire young workers at the higher minimum wage.

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Lawmakers to finish up state budget after break

Legislators to return July 16 after failing to wrap up energy, health care, spending plans.

Mark Hornbeck and Gary Heinlein / Detroit News Lansing Bureau

LANSING -- While state lawmakers pulled a weekend all-nighter to write the state budget, reform Michigan's energy policy and revamp its health care industry, they didn't actually finish any of those jobs.

They'll return to the Capitol on July 16 to tie up some loose ends.

The \$44 billion budget for the fiscal year that starts Oct. 1 is mostly done, but yet to be approved are some of the most critical spending bills: public schools, roads and revenue sharing to local governments, among others.

An energy package that would compel the utilities to get some of their power from renewable sources and limit competition in the electricity market passed the Senate. But it now goes back to the House for consideration.

The House rejected the Senate's version of a plan to make changes in health care coverage sought by Blue Cross Blue Shield. Backers say it would make insurance more affordable and accessible to individuals who have to buy their own policies. Opponents say it would give Blue Cross an even greater stranglehold on the health insurance market.

Now, the legislation goes to a joint House-Senate committee. It's unclear whether legislators will try to tackle all of those issues when they return to work in mid-July, before a summer campaigning break. But they will at least attempt to finish the budget.

"Over the next couple of weeks, we'll have time to work out some of the differences on the budget," said Greg Bird, spokesman for House Speaker Andy Dillon.

The biggest stumbling block to a final budget deal is Gov. Jennifer Granholm's plan to downsize large urban high schools. She wants to sell bonds for \$300 million to pay for the program, but Republicans are reluctant to borrow money in uncertain economic times.

"We hope we can reach an agreement with the governor on some of the issues outstanding," said Matt Marsden, spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Mike Bishop, R-Rochester.

"The majority leader feels we could better spend our money statewide (than on the small-high-schools plan), given the Detroit Schools' trouble with their budget."

When all is said and done, the 2008-09 budget will have a slight decrease in the general fund from \$9.9 billion to \$9.7 billion and a modest increase in school aid from \$12.6 billion to \$13 billion.

"All of the hard work and long hours that went into crafting a budget plan that moves Michigan forward are paying (off) for our residents of Michigan," said House Appropriations Chairman George Cushingberry Jr., D-Detroit. House Republican Leader Craig DeRoche of Novi doesn't see it that way.

"Democrats took \$1.4 billion from Michigan's struggling families and businesses, and yet we are left with another year of the same old overstuffed, inefficient government," DeRoche said. "The priorities of Michigan families are being grossly ignored, and it will take fresh new leadership to turn Michigan in a new direction."

Granholtz proposals included in the budget agreement are:

- A \$59 million No Worker Left Behind retraining program.
- A 100-recruit school to train Michigan State Police troopers.
- An expanded Michigan nursing corps program to address the nursing shortage and special courts to divert the mentally ill from jails and prisons.

The governor proposed increases of \$108-\$216 per student in school aid, but it appears the final spread will be closer to \$55-\$110.

Next year's transportation budget may not be finalized until after Labor Day. Lawmakers are feuding over plans to build a second bridge across the Detroit River to smooth cross-border trade.

Senate Republicans favor a proposal from Ambassador Bridge owner Matty Maroun to use his own money for a second span next to his bridge. Granholtz, many Democratic lawmakers and the transportation department want the green light to continue preparations for a new bridge connecting with a major Canadian highway.

There's no controversy over the not-passed general government budget, which covers the Legislature, governor's staff, attorney general, treasury and other offices. It includes revenue sharing to cities, townships and a handful of counties,

which will increase by 2 percent. There wasn't time to print the spending list and put it before lawmakers during the hectic Friday session.

On the energy front, the Senate passed a package requiring utilities, by 2015, to get 7 percent of their power from renewable sources, such as wind, biomass and solar. The House had adopted a plan mandating 10 percent by 2015 and 25 percent by 2025.

"In these tough economic times, Senate Republicans refused to impose the House-supported government mandate for renewable energy that would require residents to pay significantly more for their basic energy needs," said Sen. Patricia Birkholz, R-Saugatuck Township.

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